THE NATURE, DUTY AND BENEFITS OF A PIOUS CONFIDENCE IN GOD

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN

BRADFORD, VERMONT,

DECEMBER 26, 1858;

AT THE FUNERAL OF

MRS. MARTHA T. PECKETT,

WIFE OF

JOHN B. PECKETT, ESQ.

Who died suddenly Dec. 25, 1858 ; at the age of 66 years,

By REV. SILAS McKEEN,

PASTOR OF THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN BRADFORD

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

E. A. FULLER'S Book & Job Office, Bradford, Vt.

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CONFIDENCE IN GOD.

Isaiah 26; 4:—*Trust ye in the Lord forever; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength.*

Death has again appeared among us; and executed his commission at a moment so unexpected, in a manner so unusual, as must, one would think, affect every heart. One of our neighbors, a lady highly and justly esteemed for her amiable qualities and excellent character, has been suddenly removed from time into eternity! What a world of trials, a vale of tears, is this! Well will it be for us if these bereavements and sorrows lead us to seek rest and security where, only, they can be found. They are not to be looked for here.

From age to age the bodily infirmities, diseases, and sufferings of the human race, their mental disquietudes and sorrows, their disasters, disappointments, sore bereavments, and manifold tribulations, have been essentially the same, and death has reigned over all with resistless dominion. Man is a creature of yesterday, and may not boast himself of to-morrow. His life, like the glittering rain-drop on the trembling leaf, is scarcely seen before it disappears. He is subject to agencies in nature against which he has no power to contend with the least prospect of success. The lightning may suddenly strike him dead; the sweeping tornado may bury him under the ruins of his habitation, or the raging ocean may engulf him beneath its tumultuous billows. The pestilence which walketh in darkness, the destruction which wasteth at noon-day, or the sudden and unaccountable failure of some of the vital springs of the nice machinery of his bodily organization, may, at any time, reduce him to the awful stillness of death. The surrounding objects in which he is most inclined to trust, disappoint his hopes; the sources from which he had expected to derive consolation fail; every earthly ground of dependence fails, and he is taught no less by the necessity of his case than by the voice of divine revelation,

to look from earth to Heaven. Such has been the practice of the servants of God in all ages. The royal Psalmist, clothed with power and highly honored as he was, still felt, at times most keenly, that for him there was no support or help but in God. As the dark waves of affliction were breaking over him, his his voice was heard, saying, "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth." And the prophet Isaiah amid the tumult of nations and the fall of empires; impressively besought his countrymen to "Trust in the Lord forever; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength." I propose to consider,

The insufficency of all earthly things to sustain us; for what things we may with propriety trust in God; and the duty and safety of thus trusting in him forever.

I. The insufficiency of all earthly things to sustain us.

If any are inclined to depend entirely or chiefly on earthly things for support and happiness let them take as wide a survey as possible, of all terrestrial objects which men most desire; and say which of these seems sufficient to make them happy? Suppose you were to choose for yourself, what object, pursuit, or gratification, would you select, as conducing more than all others to human happiness?

Would you, in case you could acquire them, trust in great *earthly possessions?* Suppose you were the owner of large real estates, of vast hoarded treasures, of a mansion unrivalled for beauty and commodiousness; that you had every thing you could reasonably desire in regard to equipage, attendance, and style of living; and were completely free from all pecuniary embarassments; that you had every thing of this sort of which you could conceive as desirable;—would any or all of these things make you truly and permanently contented? Would you feel that your best interests were secured? That there could be no cause for further solicitude? Might not your possessions be destroyed by some of the many casualties which no human wisdom can forsee, and no human power avert? Or be

wrested from you by the craft and villainy of the wicked? Multitudes, we all know, have been reduced from wealth to poverty, and multitudes of others will, beyond doubt, experience the same painful reverse in their affairs. He who hopes for permanent happiness from any such source as this, is continually liable to overwhelming disappointments. Even if there were no danger of loss, how great must be the anxiety and care and trouble of one who has so many things, so many perplexing matters, to oversee and manage? And when all is done, how very small a portion of what he possesses can the man of wealth by any contrivance appropriate to his own benefit. Those who have not a hundreth part so much as he, may be equally well provided with all the necessaries and conveniencies of life. The worldling labors in vain, and spends his strength for naught. Man has wants which the things of earth are wholly incompetent to supply. Oftentimes they cannot procure ease for his body, when racked with pain; they can never procure comfort for his heart, when pierced by the stings of an accusing conscience; nor purchase the remission of his sins; or prolong his life at all beyond its established limits. When death calls, his summons must be obeyed, however dreadful to him who is at ease in his possessions. Who is *that* surrounded with plenty, and saying to his soul, "thou hast much goods laid up in store for many years; take thine ease, eat drink, and be merry?" Ah! it is the rich worldling, against whom the decree has already gone forth, "Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee!—Then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?"

To depend on wealth which cannot satisfy the soul while possessed, which is continually liable to fail, and which cannot prolong life an hour, or confer any advantage whatever in the world to which we are all speedily going, is surely an indication of astonishing inconsideration and folly.

Will you then depend for happiness on *human favor?* The friendship and approbation of those we esteem, indeed of our fellow men generally is desirable; we all love to be well es-

teemed and spoken of; but the ever shifting winds are not more capricious and variable than popular favor; bestowed often without consideration, or regard to merit, it is withdrawn not less frequently without cause. Trifles light as air, incidents over which one has no control, remarks made without any serious meaning, acts well intended but inexpedient; or judicious and necessary, but not falling in with prevailing opinions and customs, operate, not unfrequently, to turn the whole current of popular favor from even distinguished individuals, and to cast them off as things out of fashion and of no further use. So it has been in all ages past, and is likely to be in ages yet to come. He who leans on human rather than divine favor comes, before he is aware, in contact with "a spear, on whose sharp point peace bleeds and hope expires."

Will you then depend on your *present peace and prosperity*? All nature admonishes you to forbear. The tree luxuriant in blossoms and promising abundance of fruit, may suddenly be dispoiled of all its beauty and productiveness by the blighting frost. The field waving with bending grain, whitening for harvest, may be laid waste by the furious storm, before the reapers shall enter it. The well built ship, returning from her long and prosperous voyage, may, even within sight of her destined haven, strike on some hidden rock, and go suddenly down with all on board. And so may all our plans and pursuits, however successful or promising now, end suddenly, in overwhelming disappointment and anguish of spirit. Where, on these shores of eternity can you look without beholding the strown fragments of human hopes? What breeze bears not in its bosom the sighs and groans of disappointed expectations?

Retiring from the wide field of the world, will you seek happiness within the sacred enclosure of your own *family circle*? There, if anywhere on earth, a resting place for the wearied soul might be expected. But how often does wasting sickness, does death, intrude into families strongly united in love, and inflict in their bosoms wounds which earth cannot heal? When, our beloved relatives go out from us to reside for a while in some

other part of the country, we have no assurance that we shall ever again listen to their voices, or behold their countenances in the land of the living. When they are restored to us again, it may be in the coffin, for the purpose of burial with their deceased kindred. Or if the stroke of death is for a few years deferred, yet how soon do families become dispersed over the face of the earth, and the paternal habitation becomes solitary? Sweet and transitory as the beauty and perfume of a flower garden are all domestic enjoyments. Let us thank God for them while they continue, and so live in love and peace, continually aiming to make each other happy, that the remembrance of these scenes and enjoyments may never cease to be sweet to our souls.

Thrown back on yourself, will you depend on your own wisdom, firmness of soul, stores of knowledge, or resources of any kind for support and comfort? Alas! that wisdom, in many a trying exigency, may prove to be but folly; that firmness of soul in which you have gloried, touched by the fiery ordeal of unexpected adversity, may melt like wax before the fire; your stores of knowledge through the treachery of memory be lost; and all the sources from which you have hoped to derive comfort fail, utterly, when most needed; like temporary rivulets under the parching and protracted heat of summer. "Thus saith the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which executeth judgement and rightousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, saith the Lord." "Trust ye in the Lord forever, for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength," We may now consider.

II. For what things we may with propriety trust in the Lord.

Obviously we have no encouragement, no right, to trust in God to do any thing for us or others inconsistent with his own infinite wisdom and benevolence; contrary to his word or in any

respect incompatible with the highest good of his kingdom. Our trust in him must be rational, pious, and for such things as he has encouraged us to expect. And these blessings we may hope to obtain only in ways according with the laws of nature; and in the use of such means as we are authorized by divine revelation to employ. We must comply with the conditions which God has made essential to their bestowment. To pursue a contrary course would be as absurd as to trust that God would enable the husbandman to reap without sowing; or a machinist to construct the wheels and all the various parts of a factory without contrivance and labor. Under the government of God every thing, so far as his agency is concerned, is conducted according to established laws. And these laws, both in the physical and moral world we must regard; we must act in conformity to them, if we would prosper in any good undertaking.

For what then may we trust in the Lord? We may surely trust in him that *he will govern the universe and order all things, in the best manner*. His kingdom ruleth over all; and he doeth his will in the armies of heaven above, and among the inhabitants of the earth beneath. The immense planets which roll in their courses, and the particles of matter which float in the atmosphere; the highest orders of created intelligence who dwell in the light of his countenance, and the infinitude of animalcules too minute to be discerned by any eye but his own; the revolutions of empires, and the fortunes of individual persons indeed all changes, all events and results in the universe, are absolutely subject to his will; and continually upheld and controlled by his power. And being infinitely wise, he must know in regard to all individuals, in all circumstances, what is best for him to do or suffer to be done. No protracted investigation, no ballancing of advantages and disadvantages, no painful uncertainty in regard to what may be best, can ever retard his operations or purposes. He has eternally seen what would be eternally best for him to perform or permit. And being infinite in benevolence, delighting to communicate happiness, and to

promote the highest good of the universe by filling it with his glory it must have been his eternal purpose so to do. And being clothed with omnipotence, perfectly able by an act of his will to execute his pleasure, the unchangable God, it must be that he has hitherto governed, that he will forever govern, the whole creation in the wisest and best manner. For this then we may firmly trust in him.

But, to be somewhat more specific; we may trust that *no designs or efforts of Gods enemies in opposition to his cause will ever be suffered ultimately to prosper.* The enemies of God are numerous and active, they deem themselves strong, and at times are confident of success. But they and their plans are all known to him; their work and impious designs are manifest to his view. Their lives are in his hands; for their existence they are dependent on his will; and in no circumstances can they do any more than he is pleased to suffer. He may allow them to prosper for a time, and to triumph in their success; but that prosperity will prove ruinous to themselves, and that triumphing short. They struggle against omnipotence; and cannot prevail. No weapon formed against Zion can finally prosper, and every tongue which shall speak against her, God will in judgment condemn. Not only will God turn the counsels of the wicked headlong, he will overrule them, and all the actions originating in them for good. "He will cause" even "the wrath of man to praise him; and the remainder of wrath he will restrain."

Again we may trust in God that he will *have mercy on the guilty* so far as may be consistent with his honor and the best good of his kingdom. We cannot justly infer from his benevolence that he will not execute justice, for the general order and happiness of his kingdom may require that he should. He has executed justice already, often and most signally; and has distinctly declared his purpose to execute it hereafter. And with him there is no respect of persons. But still, a voice from his throne declares, "As I live saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Sinners, universally, deserve his condemnation, his justice would be manifest in exe-

cuting on them the sentence of his violated law; but so wonderful is his compassion, so great his delight in mercy, that he will execute condemnation on no more, nor to any greater extent, than infinite benevolence and wisdom may require. His ways and thoughts in regard to showing mercy are as far above ours, as the heavens are above the earth.

I remark once more, that we may trust in God that, *he will do for his people all which he has engaged to perform.* His word is replete with assurances of forgiveness and sanctification; of support and consolation. It assures us that, "all things shall work together for good to them that love God; that he will give grace and glory and withhold no good thing from them that walk uprightly." "Godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." "He who hath not spared his own Son, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" Such are some of the promises, the blessed assurances, which God has given to those who love him and repose a pious confidence in him. In these promises all his children are equally interested; and when their faith is strengthened to grasp them firmly, they may each of them, say with the psalmist, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life of whom shall I be afraid? Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war should arise against me, in this will I be confident;" and with Paul, "Who shall seperate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness or peril or sword?—Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that hath loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Such are the feelings and the confidence of the Christian: sometimes; but not always. Well would it be for us did we invariably thus trust in him. And this brings me to show

III. The duty and safety of thus trusting in God forever. "In him is everlasting strength."

There are seasons when to exercise a firm confidence in God requires uncommon faith and piety. When the light of the divine countenance shines upon us, and the voice of gladness is heard in our habitations, when our business is prosperous, and means of support ample and apparently sure, when friends are numerous and vieing with each other in acts of kindness to us; and all our prospects both for this world and the next encouraging, it is easy, very easy, to trust in the Lord, and to rejoice in his dealings with us. But when adversity overtakes us, and all our pleasing prospects of earthly prosperity vanish away; and dark forebodings in regard to the future crowd into our minds; when sickness enters our families, and our hearts are trembling for the result, when one beloved member after another is removed by death, attended it may be by circumstances peculiarly trying; and we are made to feel that we are sorely chastened; then to trust in God with a holy, unshaken confidence is not so easy. Then strong faith, like a heavy anchor grappled in a deep bedded rock, is requisite to keep us steady amid the billows of affliction rolling by, or breaking over us. And this faith, it is the privilage, the right, of the Christian at *all times* to exercise.

God is always the same. As in the natural world, whatever storms may arise, and dark clouds intervene between us and the sun, that sun is always the same, shining continually with the same glorious effulgence, so is it with God. He is subject to no change, but is as compassionate, as beneficent, as faithful at one time as at another. Owing to the frailty of man, earthly friends may fail us; their love may wax cold, or even be converted into hatred; but the love of God is everlasting. He knows all our circumstances, and wants, the thoughts and emotions of our hearts, better than we can express them; he is fully acquainted with all our anxieties and sorrows; and "as a father pitieth his children so the Lord pitieth them that fear him."

Whatever instrumentalities may have been concerned in bringing us into trouble, whether it has been induced by our own delinquency in duty, or by the indiscretion of friends, or the ill natured conduct of enemies, still it has occurred under the overruling providence of God; and must be designed for our benefit, if we are his children. He never afflicts us for his pleasure. When he afflicts us it is for our own profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness. It is our duty then, to trust in him as firmly in seasons of trial and sorrow, as in those of prosperity and gladness. He is at all times the same compassionate and most gracious Being: "the Father of mercies," "the giver of every good and perfect gift." Men may grow weary in well doing, their strength may fail, or their means of charitable giving become exhausted; but not so is it with our God. "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth fainteth not, neither is weary?—He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength." In every present distress he is, in every future exigency he will be, as able to support and comfort us as he has been in like seasons past. In him is "everlasting strength."

Again, we should trust in the Lord with unfailing confidence, because the severest trials of his people, in a multitude of cases have been found even in this life to be productive of great benefit to them. Read again the thrilling narrations given in the holy scriptures of the sore and overwhelming afflictions and persecutions and sufferings of such men as Jacob, Joseph, David, Daniel and the apostle Paul; and notice the sanctifying, the elevating influence of these almost insupportable trials on their hearts and characters; see them shining brighter and brighter in consequence of them; and becoming more and more eminently useful; peruse the history of those who have been most eminent for strong faith, and ardent piety, and extensive usefulness, in more recent times; of the reformers, who delivered themselves and the church from the thraldom of Romanism; of our pilgrim fathers, who were willing to suffer the loss of all

earthly things for the privilege of serving God with a pure conscience, and without molestation; of Whitefield and Edwards and Brainerd, and such like burning and shining lights; and you will see that God disciplined them all, thoroughly, in the school of adversity and trial; that they were cast down, but not destroyed; chastened but not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; generally poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing all things; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer. And in consequence of their tribulations gained a depth of piety, a strength of faith, a lustre of moral excellence, which they never would, or could, have acquired, had they been continually indulged with quietude and prosperity. As their trials roused into energetic action the powers of their souls, and brought them nearer to God, and made them more faithful in his service than they would otherwise have been, their usefulness on earth, and even their happiness, both for time and eternity, were augmented by them. God knows by what means he can best discipline his people, and transform them into his likeness, and prepare them for his kingdom. When the church has wandered away from the banner of the cross and become entangled with the cares, and captivated by the allurements of the world, lost the spirit of prayer, and ceased, almost, from all faithful efforts to promote the Saviour's cause, God has, ofttimes, visited her with stripes, and suffered internal difficulties to spring up, or the fires of persecution to be kindled on every side, and her enemies to triumph over her; and at the same time has withdrawn the light of his countenance; not to distroy, but to humble, purify, and save her. When he visits his people either individually or collectively with chastisements it is not in judgment, but in mercy;—their afflictions, though grievous are made to yield unto them the peaceable fruits of righteousness. Here then is a reason why we even in the darkest times should quietly wait and expect the salvation of the Lord. To the upright there arises light in the darkness.

We should trust firmly in the Lord at all times, because both

our usefulness and happiness will thereby be promoted. We have seen that others have found it good for them, in the midst of their afflictions, to trust in the Lord, and to stay themselves upon their God. And so will it now be with all who do so. A pious confidence in God cannot fail to afford support and consolation to those who exercise it. Trials we must experience, there is no possibility of avoiding them. God never designed that, in this state of conflict, we should be exempt from them. If we sink under them, if we yield to discouragements, because our path through life is not free from difficulties, our whole course here below must be like that of the lost and troubled traveller struggling through the deep glens and over the rugged mountains of ~~our~~ an almost impervious wilderness.

But a cheerful confidence in God will introduce us into the high way of holiness, and enable us to go on courageously, from strength to strength, until we appear in Zion before God. Thus confiding, we may live above the world; may live as heirs of a glorious immortality should, and derive our happiness from sources as unfailing as the wisdom and goodness and power of God. Trusting in him we may take our stand, as it were, on some high mountain top, whence under a serene sky and the shining of a noonday sun, we may look down with admiration on the dense clouds and raging storms and flashing lightings beneath us, rejoicing that we are above them all, completely beyond the reach of their desolating fury, the light of the divine countenance beaming around us! O how desirable to gain a standing so elevated, where we may at all times enjoy the blessedness of the "man who trusteth in the Lord, and whose hope the Lord is." Our happiness, our usefulness requires that we should at all times trust in the Lord, and stay ourselves upon our God.

Finally, we should thus invariably trust in our heavenly Father because thereby we honor him. The confiding child comprehends not all his father's plans; some of them may seem to him mysterious, yet he distrusts not his wisdom, or the kindness of his heart, or refuses submission to his authority. Thus he honors him. So should it be with the children of God. When

we firmly believe that he is overruling all things in the best manner; and will cause all things to work together for good to those who love him, and so submit ourselves entirely to his guidance and pleasure, we manifestly glorify him. When gloom rests on our national prospects, or we are visited with sore family afflictions, when we meet with severe disappointments and sad bereavements; when near and beloved relations are taken from us suddenly by death, and we with bleeding hearts are following their precious remains to the grave: when clouds and darkness hide from us the gracious designs of our heavenly Father, and his way is in the sea and his footsteps are not known then, especially, may we honor him by firmly trusting in him. Then is the time for faith to triumph; for the power, the infinite worth, the heavenly origin, of true religion to be manifested. *Then* is the time for us to say with heartfelt emotion, and greatly to the honor of the divine majesty, "The Lord God is my strength." "Mine eyes are unto thee, O God, the Lord: in thee is my trust; leave not my soul destitute." "Thou art my portion O Lord." To all such he will be a very present help in time of trouble; and in the days of eternity they will heartily bless him for all the trials which during this transitory life they were called to endure.

Life, how transitory it is; and how liable to be terminated suddenly! Memory quickly glances over the course of our deceased friend, though longer than what falls to the common lot of mortals. She lived a little over 66 years. I remember her as she was in the bloom of her youth; and am still impressed by the elegance of her appearance and the exemplary propriety of her deportment.* I remember her when with our friend, the principal mourner on this solemn occasion, she stood before me, almost forty-two years ago, at the hymeneal altar, and with great seriousness entered into the marriage covenant; the obligations of which, during the remnant of her life, she with distinguished fidelity fulfilled. I have often seen her in her own habitation,

* Then Miss. Martha Tilton, of Bradford.

presiding with matronly dignity and lady-like courtesy; ever demeaning herself with propriety, both in seasons of health and prosperity, and when disease and death entered her habitation and removed one and then another of her sons, from her maternal and tender care. Her unfailing loving kindness towards the motherless infant whom she with her husband's approbation adopted, and brought up as one of her own, and who is a sincere mourner on this occasion,* is well known. Often have I seen her here in this house of worship, listening attentively to the dispensation of divine truth; and repeatedly have I conversed with her on the great concerns of the soul and eternity; and always found her seriously disposed; sometimes expressing a hope in Christ, but never feeling quite strong enough to come forth and make a public profession of her faith. I believe she heartily rejoiced in seeing others, especially any of her own family, giving evidence of true piety, and sincerely desired that all might become Christians indeed. We cannot but *hope* that she had found Christ to be precious, and that in the great day it will appear that her life was hid with him in God.

Thus she moved quietly along, till last Thursday morning, when sitting lovingly with her daughter, as their manner was, and while industriously engaged with her needle preparing some garment for the comfort of her husband, then away, the messenger of Death came, and without a minute's warning instantly removed her into eternity! While the body yet retained its posture in the chair, the spirit was in the immediate presence of the great God her Saviour! It is thought her death, was the result of *heart disease.* The pain of dying she had no time to realize. In her case was strikingly verified that scripture, "In such an hour as ye think not, the son of man cometh."

Such was the will of her heavenly Father; and it becomes us to know that he is God. We sympathize deeply with the bereaved husband and surviving children, with the loving sister here present and the brother far away; and pray that her sudden death may be sanctified to the everlasting good of all. God has spoken to you, my friends, most impressively, calling you to prepare, without delay, to meet him. May this call prove effectual; so that if any of you should be removed from time into eternity as

* Now Mrs. J. W. Shaw, of Charlestown, Mass.

suddenly as she was, you may be found ready; and the transition prove to you most happy and glorious. In the mean time, walk humbly with God, be heartily reconciled to him, acknowledge him in all your ways, and he will sustain you under this, and every trial which you may be called to endure.

Such a death ought to make an indelible impression on every mind. Every individual here, is, every instant, liable to be cut off by the stroke of death! To defer preparation for eternity is unwise in the extreme. Whatever we have to do, should be done quickly. O, let us all realize how precarious is our hold on life, how utterly uncertain all earthly things, how soon the grave will be waiting to receive *our* lifeless remains; and henceforth repose a pious confidence in God, and walk humbly with him. He is worthy of our supreme love, of our firmest confidence. In him, and him alone can we find permanent support and consolation. Therefore, "Trust ye in the Lord forever; for in the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength."

Amen.